



Mary E. Sarotte, “A Small Town in (East) Germany: The Erfurt Meeting of 1970 and the Dynamics of Cold War Détente,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Winter 2001): 85-104.

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Drawing on previously secret party and police archives of the former German Democratic Republic, Mary E. Sarotte argues that the mini-summit in Erfurt on March 19, 1970, between Willy Brandt, chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, and Willi Stoph, Brandt’s nominal counterpart from the GDR, was more significant than historians have heretofore recognized. Since little of constructive value was accomplished in the talks, it was not the Brandt-Stoph conversations in and of themselves that made the Erfurt meeting worthy of historians’ attention. Instead, the significance of the meeting lay in the consequences of the enthusiastic reception given Brandt by well-wishers along his train route to Erfurt and especially by a crowd of approximately 1500 people who, when Brandt and his entourage arrived at their destination, spilled onto the plaza between the train station and the hotel cheering, “Willy, Willy.” The demonstrations caught the Stasi unprepared, exposing the public-opinion catch-22 that constrained East bloc leaders: they could not afford to ignore public sentiment for detente, democratization, or, in the case of Germany, reunification, but at the same time they could not afford to turn it loose. The Stasi’s mishandling of the affair -- that is, its failure to prevent a public show of enthusiasm for Brandt -- weakened Berlin’s already circumscribed autonomy vis-a-vis Moscow, while it also led the Soviets to pause and reflect on the pluses and minuses of Brandt’s policy of Ostpolitik, thereby delaying its progress. At the same time, the demonstrations created tensions between Bonn and Washington, Sarotte maintains, inasmuch as Henry Kissinger expressed his concern to President Richard Nixon that Ostpolitik might unleash uncontrollable nationalistic and democratic forces that would threaten the division of Germany and undermine cold war stability. Another unfortunate effect of the Erfurt meeting was that the Stasi reacted by stepping up security measures within the GDR.

Sarotte’s telling of this small story about big consequences is engaging, and her conclusions are no doubt correct about the fallout from Erfurt. Her creative research in GDR archives provides needed documentation on Berlin’s and Moscow’s worries about grassroots support for German reunification and democratization. Because of similar and even more dramatic public demonstrations and rebellions in Eastern Europe during the cold war period preceding Erfurt, Communist officials, however, had to have been very much aware of the explosive potential within nationalistic and democratic sentiment -- or in any event, within anti-Communist, anti-Russian, anti-cold war, or pro-Western sentiment. Just five months before, for example, Nixon had received a warm welcome from large Romanian crowds in Bucharest, leading him to conclude that Communist officials were “sitting on a tinder box.” Sarotte’s main point, however, is not that the Erfurt demonstration was the first to reveal that Eastern Europe was a house of cards, but that it had an impact on Ostpolitik and detente that has been unappreciated by historians.

A fuller exploration of this interrelationship is not the subject or purpose of Sarotte's article. Building on her account, however, I will take the liberty of making at least one -- and probably obvious -- observation about the striking parallels between Moscow's and Washington's approach to detente: both the U.S. and the USSR were primarily or solely interested in pursuing detente for their own realpolitik reasons; they were not particularly motivated by democratic or idealistic reasons; their concerns about Ostpolitik's destabilizing potential merely delayed their acceptance of a Machiavellian detente. Clearly, Soviet leaders were wary of the democratic potential in Ostpolitik, but what they wanted from Ostpolitik and detente superceded whatever their concerns were about nationalism and democracy. They wanted a de-nuclearized West Germany with weakened military ties to NATO, U.S. recognition of post-World War II European borders and of its hegemony in Eastern Europe, strategic stability and a recognition of nuclear parity, and Western goods, technology, and cash. Washington was concerned about Ostpolitik's destabilizing nationalistic potential in Germany and jealous of the credit Brandt received for his bold and open initiatives toward detente. But the Nixon administration's basic goals were more important: East-West military stability in a context of U.S. superiority, building political capital in the United States, and using detente as a bargaining chip in the rivalry with Moscow.

Moscow and Washington played the great game great powers do. When Nixon passed through Bucharest in August 1969, the reception given him by Romanian crowds pleased him, but mainly, it seems, because it served as a thorn in Moscow's side. He was also favorably impressed by Nicolae Ceausescu, a brutal dictator whom he regarded as intellectually brighter and more gutsy than other Communist officials, and whom he appreciated for his contacts with Beijing at a time when Nixon was beginning to play the China card in connection with the Vietnam War. In contrast, Brandt's motives in Ostpolitik, while not entirely altruistic, seemed to have been founded on genuinely humanistic concerns.

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